

Drums sound toxic alarm at Somerville site

Abandoned chemicals found at paint factory prompt officials to prepare evacuation plan

By Eleanor Barrett

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Emergency officials have been bracing for a possible worst-case scenario — a fire releasing toxic fumes into the atmosphere — since hundreds of drums of dangerous chemicals were found abandoned at Color Technology Inc. in Somerville.

Somerset County, Somerville and Raritan officials have devised a plan to evacuate a half-mile radius around the paint and pigment manufacturing plant on Cornell Boulevard, on the Somerville-Raritan border, and in the middle of a residential neighborhood. The evacuation plan includes homes,

schools, churches, offices, banks, apartment buildings and stores.

A major fire at the site would also result in the closing of Route 206, the Somerville Circle, and NJ Transit's Raritan Valley Line, authorities said.

Federal Environmental Protection Agency officials, who launched their investigation into problems at Color Technology on Tuesday, agreed that if there was a fire, it would be best to err on the side of caution.

"We've concurred with their plan, to treat it as a severe fire. It would burn hot and would be a very strong fire. It's going to be an all-or-nothing type of fire," said Jeff Bechtel, an environmental scientist who is heading up

the EPA investigation.

The probe began May 27, when local officials, believing the property to be abandoned, condemned it and declared it to be an imminent hazard. Somerville officials say, however, that they had been suspicious of the plant's operations since December, when they started noticing utility shut-offs and employee layoffs.

Neighbors and former employees who stopped by the building yesterday — now cordoned off with police tape — said they are not surprised that owner Carl Curtis is under the gun of federal and local officials, though Curtis maintains he is innocent of any wrongdoing.

Somerville fire official Barry Van Horn disagrees.

"Once inside, we realized the condition of the building and its contents posed a serious threat, not only for

the building, but for the firefighters who would have to depress the fire," he said.

Bechtel said those conditions included the improper storage of hundreds of drums of toxic and flammable liquids, including methyl ethyl ketone, acetone and dimethylformamide, solvents and petroleum-based chemicals.

According to the Emergency Response Guidebook of the Department of Transportation, health hazards posed by all three chemicals in a fire include the fumes turning into poisonous gas, causing dizziness or suffocation, and burning of skin and eyes.

The environmental problems at the Somerville plant are not the only concerns Curtis, of Ramsey, has to deal with. According to borough records, he owes upwards of \$18,000 in sewer and municipal taxes.

THE DANGER NEXT DOOR



Earl Pomrinca of Bridgewater, front, who worked as foreman at the Color Technology plant in Somerville, and Frank Passe, whose property borders the factory, discuss their concerns about the discovery of abandoned chemical drums at the site. See story on Page 33.

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